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ABSTRACT

Teaching a world literature class at a public college presented an opportunity to test Allan Bloom's and E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s charges that today's college students are not only ignorant of great literature, but also ill-equipped to seriously consider such works. Beginning with a class survey of reading tastes and experiences, it was discovered that students shared an enthusiasm for reading but felt apprehension about demanding texts. Using a journey motif as a unifying theme allowed for misstarts and misinterpretations as students learned their way around classic texts. Student presentations established a pattern that was later used on midterm and final exams: students measured their values against those in the literary classic. In contradiction to Bloom's assumptions, students did profitably measure their own values against those expressed in the great book. Drawing on personal experience allows a measure for assessing great literature that should not be overlooked. Bloom and Hirsch notwithstanding, the contemporary student is open to the enrichment and illumination great literature offers. (SAM)

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Peter L. Caverzasi
On teaching literary classics

I first taught a world literature class at an urban, public college last fall. I had the opportunity to test charges popularized by Allan Bloom and E.D. Hirsch, Jr. about college students; they are not only ignorant of great literature, but ill-equipped to seriously consider such works. Although covering a narrower scope than Bloom or Hirsch, it pleased me the class readings were mentioned in Hirsch's "Appendix: What Literate Americans Know" (Cultural Literacy 152-215). At least I wasn't seeming to use great books while actually peddling faddish fiction. Bloom didn't reference one reading (Rabelais) in the "Index" (385-92) to The Closing of the American Mind. I knew Rabelais' absence didn't slight him in the great literature canon. Rabelais simply wasn't useful for Bloom's polemic.

One thing especially concerned me that Bloom said: "It is much more difficult today to attach the classic books to any experience or felt need the students have"(61). How can literature be effectively taught without discussion based upon personal experience? Readers must first engage the text to profit from it. If, as Bloom implies, the contemporary student is nearly an empty vessel of sensibility, then understanding a literary classic by comparing it against one's sensibility appears doomed. You can't get sense from

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the insensible. Hollow college students trying to encounter great literature will see and say nothing about it.

I hoped Bloom underestimated his recent college students when he described them as contented and unimaginative (61). I planned to explore and personally rediscover great books using a dynamic triad of teacher, text, and student. Textual engagement is impossible if the student leg of the triad is incapable of it. I first had to learn what preparation my students had for our encounter with literary classics. I didn't want to teach a class that was either too advanced or too simple for my students.

I began with a class survey. I asked why the course was taken, what prior readings the student had done, and what the student hoped to take away from the course? The responses widely diverged. Reading tastes encompassed mysteries, pulp fiction, English Romantic poetry, and just stories--"no messages or threats." Some students expressed fear that the readings were beyond their ability. They just wanted to understand great books. Other students expected to develop new reading interests and have fun with the texts. Two specific goals were notable. One student needed three credits for the class. Another wanted to read great literature without using Cliffs Notes.

The responses indicated a shared enthusiasm for reading but apprehension about demanding texts. My course would

suffer if I discouraged such zest and flaunted textual difficulty. Pictorial aids were used to frame the texts for discussion. Before we read the Odyssey, I previewed Odysseus' journey with an oversized map of the Mediterrean. Dante's Inferno was preceded by a handout for the circles of hell. Photographs of Dublin were used before considering Joyce's Portrait of the Artist. Visual presentations assisted the student in locating the reading geographically. Pictorial territory was the backdrop for textual terra incognita.

Traversing ancient to modern worlds required a thematic thread to focus character and cultural continuity or difference. I chose the journey as a unifying theme. A character's journey was a major motif of each class reading. Shifts from a physical to mental journey occurred as the readings entered the modern period. The journey motif could be traced as it transformed from physical, to spiritual, to political, to valuative, and finally to mental journey. The journey thread linked differing world views from ancient to modern times. Continuity and discontinuity between earlier times and the contemporary world would be examined.

A preparatory study guide was used to direct the readings beforehand. I contributed presentations on literary technique. Oral presentations by students on topics of interest supplemented class discussion. I avoided "relevant"

teaching approaches to the literary classics. The Inferno would not be presented as a hallucinatory experience. Nor was Odysseus a literary "Master of the Universe." My guiding principle was appreciating literature through student textual engagement. Students wouldn't passively transcribe my words. They would puzzle, question, and interpret the reading on their own. This meant that I would have to accept misstarts and misinterpretations from students for the sake of encountering the text. The goal was for the student to gain personal understanding of the work.

As things developed, discussion overcame some textual misreading. The class recognized that Rabelais wasn't simply titillating with his sexual references, but using such details for satirical purpose. Nietzsche, though initially glossed as misogynistic, emerged in close reading to be reassessing value in Western society. Student interpretation provided a number of textual insights for me. With all questionable readings, students talked through differing interpretations with me.

As one might expect, abstract notions required more discussion time. The nature of fate in the Odyssey recurred in several classes as we read and discussed that epic. By the fourth week, I realized my reading list had to be shortened to adequately examine the remaining works. I omitted Stendahl's Charterhouse at Parma. Although an

understanding of the political role of religion in society was sacrificed, its exclusion was salutary. Students were not overwhelmed by the required reading so comprehension was still possible.

My teaching was further modified by class presentations on select topics. Despite some missteps, there were real gains from most presentations. In spite of initial nervousness, each student overcame his or her fear to finish the presentation. The presentations gave students classroom identity. Previously taciturn students now contributed to discussion. At the end of each presentation, the rest of the class applauded. This small gesture went no little distance towards bolstering student confidence.

The best presentations established a pattern I later used on the mid-term and final exams. Students measured their values against those in the literary classic. The comparison was doubly instructive. The student recognized a shift or continuity in value from the textual setting to our time. The beginning reader of the classic also realized he or she had something important to say about the text. Formal barriers to understanding were compensated for by comparisons with personal experience. Contrary to Bloom, I found my students did profitably measure their own values against those expressed in the great book.

By term's end, the journey motif collected a number of

subsidiary topics. Homer broached the fate and free will question. Dante brought out the nature and consequence of sin. Rabelais used humor for the criticism and enrichment of life. Nietzsche examined the foundation of value and Joyce searched for personal identity through artistic creation. Of course, these topics were not exhausted, but they were raised in class. Important matters from life were discussed by students in their initial exposure to great literature.

Cyril Connolly, in an essay entitled "The Challenge to the Mandarins," wrote: "Literature is the art of writing something that will be read twice; journalism what will be grasped at once" (Enemies of Promise and Other Essays 24). Extending this observation, great literature is writing that must be reread over the course of a lifetime. Ideally, a college class is one opportunity, among others, to read great literature. As an initial exposure, it is crucial for developing a classics habit. Otherwise, great literature is likely to be dismissed as irrelevant or too much trouble. The initial opportunity to foster the reading of great literature shouldn't be wasted. Some teachers squander this opportunity by throwing up their hands and prejudging contemporary students by finding them incapable of reading literary classics. By drawing upon personal experience, one has a measure for assessing great literature that shouldn't be overlooked. Of course, that assessment is provisional;

reassessment occurs when the book is later reread. Great literature evaluates us in our evaluation of it. When we return to reread a literary classic, other meanings are found because of our personal development.

Yet Bloom and Hirsch present the contemporary student as one who has a journalistic mind, filled with obvious truth and momentary judgement. Student reading habits are said to require immediate understanding. As literary classics are intellectually demanding, meanings are presumed to be largely inaccessible to the student today.

My experience showed that an absence of familiarity with great books is no reason to deny meaningful learning. Indeed, novel interpretation sometimes occurs as a function of first reading. Meaningful learning occurs; students engage, criticize, object, and are changed by great literature. One must realize that such learning isn't finalized within the class. While a work of popular fiction may have its meaning extracted after one reading, great literature offers additional meaning each time it is reread. Students can't be expected to be deep readers immediately. Further learning, practice, rereading, and additional experience are needed for that to occur. For this reason, great literature should be reinforced in other academic endeavours. Unfortunately, such reinforcement is often lacking given the dominance of academic specialization today.

My class reinforced several beliefs about teaching literary classics today. Despite difficulty in covering six books spanning nearly 3,000 years, complete exposure to select great works is better than a piecemeal approach to many writings. Though lecturing is needed at the beginning of each reading, it should give way to topic correlation and contrast with personal experience later in the course. This shifts the burden of classroom responsibility more to the student. Some students may be reluctant to assume that responsibility. Teacher ingenuity is needed to engage recalcitrant students. There is no simple recipe for doing this, but a supportive, respectful classroom environment works towards this end. Some classroom goals must be abandoned for the sake of engagement. If a reading is to be excluded for the sake of more fully understanding other readings, then that reading should be eliminated. With the great literature habit, students are more likely to read the discarded work on their own. Bloom and Hirsch notwithstanding, the contemporary student is open to the enrichment and illumination great literature offers. Like all readers, the avenue to understanding is through his or her experience.

In my final class, I requestioned students about initial expectations and their fulfillment during class. The oral presentations, class discussions, and insights were praised

by the class. Several students found Rabelais repetitious while others thought Nietzsche tedious--not unfair criticisms of either writer. One student suggested group presentations to extend the depth of a single presentation. The comments reaffirmed the importance of extra-textual considerations for adequate understanding of the readings. Several students overcame their fears of approaching great literature. One student complimented me for sharing my views rather than forcing them upon the class. Everyone seemed to gain, though in different ways, from the class. Oh yes, one student also reported that she had read the literary classics without using Cliffs Notes.